

## IN FOCUS / MANEUVER WARFARE



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# Football<sub>vs</sub>.soccer

# American warfare in an era of unconventional threats

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ational Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice has a dream job after government service: becoming the next commissioner of the National Football League. In an interview with a sports magazine correspondent in April 2002, Rice commented that American football is the national pastime and an important American institution. As a national security strategist, Rice is "attracted to two fundamental similarities between football and warfare: the use of strategy and the goal of taking territory."

These are insightful observations of American foot-

ball and its long association with U.S. military thinking. Indeed, U.S. armed forces and their emphasis on the use of overwhelming force greatly resemble American football, which provides a classic model of the military concept of "centralized control, centralized execution."

Today, the United States clearly is the world's most dominant military power. In spite of the Army's mantra of "lighter, faster, more lethal" and its much-publicized Transformation, everywhere this military moves it goes like a giant football team; it employs football-like strategy and tactics in conducting the nation's security missions. However, the lack of a peer competitor raises questions about the strategic value of traditional U.S. reliance on overwhelming military power. Today's enemies include terrorists and failing states. While U.S. power is superior in strategies against peer competitor nation states, it historically has proven

Members of Task Force 3-69 cross the Euphrates River just south of Baghdad in April. Backed by responsive fire support from air and ground units, this "soccer-like" element could bring devastating fires against a much larger force.



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Vehicles from the 7th Armored Cavalry Regiment move through a severe dust storm near the village of Al Faysaliyah, Iraq. U.S. armored forces are unlikely to meet near-peer "heavy" opponents on future battlefields. less successful against guerrilla insurgencies, terrorist organizations and other unconventional challenges.

By way of analogy, soccer offers a useful model for these unconventional threats, in that the teams use finesse, surprise attack and patience instead of power and force. Soccer is an ideal paradigm of the concept of "decentralized control, decentralized execution." To compensate for their comparative conventional military weakness, terrorist organizations and failing states fight like soccer players. American football teams are not well suited to fight against these new threats. In preparing to confront these opponents, the United States should incorporate some soccer concepts in its military planning, training and war-fighting doctrine.

### FOOTBALL: PARADIGM OF U.S. CULTURE

Although it traces its origins to rugby, American football has evolved in the 20th century as a uniquely North American sport. In the United States, football ranks as the national pastime, eclipsing baseball and basketball in terms of television revenues and ratings.

From its beginnings in the late 19th century, American football has been recognized as a paradigm for the American way of war. As various commentators have noted, football is so deeply embedded in the American psyche of competition that it's with us forever — the good and the bad. It has collisions, speed, power, grace and results on every play. All the classical American concepts are played out before us: discipline, teamwork and courage under fire.

The development of American football closely parallels the rise of the United States as a great power and reflects the technological innovations that have occurred in the U.S. military. Indeed, it is no accident that one of the longest rivalries in college football is the annual Army-Navy game, which dates back more than 100 years. This interservice

rivalry has been strengthened by the addition of the Air Force Academy as a competitor for the annual "Commander's Cup," awarded to the U.S. service academy football champion.

The U.S. military has incorporated football terminology into its combat language and vice-versa. Football has its "blitz," its "trenches" and its "bombs," while the U.S. military named some of its tactics in the Persian Gulf War (the "Hail Mary maneuver") and operations in Vietnam ("Operation Linebacker") after football. As a paradigm for the American way of war against peer competitor adversaries, the game was developed in part for military training purposes.

Football is fundamentally predicated on tactics of maneuver and concentration of forces in order to penetrate the enemy's lines and to cut off lines of communication. Modern football has evolved in complexity, requiring joint operations with highly specialized players who combine speed, power, surprise and technology for their attack. Players have a specific function (positions) and play either offense or defense, but rarely both.

American football also is unique in that it is a game of intense violence with strict rules of engagement. Violations of rules are penalized against teams by loss of yardage — not against the individual player who commits a violation. Territory (yardage) is very important, as the teams seek to expand their control. Games usually are high scoring, with emphasis on mounting offensive attacks against the opposing team.

The coaching staff, assisted by an array of modern communications equipment and computer technology, carefully plans each play. Football has frequent interruptions, as each play starts with a lineup and ends after the ball is stopped. Each play is followed by strategy sessions (the huddle). Coaches will send in the tactics for the next play with frequent substitution of players. American

football and U.S. military operations are best characterized as campaigns of endless interagency and interservice committee meetings punctuated by moments of intense violence between well-equipped warriors.

#### SOCCER: A DIFFERENT WAY OF WAR

The origins of soccer date back thousands of years, although the rules of the modern game were formalized in England in the mid-1800s. Soccer is a game of continuous movement by athletes who have to play both offense and defense simultaneously. Armoring and technology are minimal. Substitutions are infrequent. A game progresses with constant movement of the ball with few interruptions. Coaches have almost no influence on plays.

Soccer usually is a low-scoring game in which the rules give strategic advantage to defensive play. Zero-zero ties are common as both teams attempt to defend their goal against a sneak attack by the opposition. The primary difference between soccer and American football is the latter's emphasis on concentration of force and power to dominate the line of scrimmage. In soccer, teams avoid concentration and seek to disperse forces around the playing field in order to exploit open areas. Soccer players look for opportunities for sneak attack.

Soccer is a paradigm of Sun Tzu's war strategy of confusing the enemy and creating uncertainties. It is not necessary to annihilate the enemy team. Instead, the tactics of surprise, finesse and continual movement of the ball are employed in order to create strategic opportunities for goals.

Another major difference between soccer and American football is the latter's obsession with exact placement of the ball on the playing field, reflecting control over territory. In soccer, officials are not concerned with precise measurements of ball placement or time, since the ball is moved quickly and fluidly without interruptions. Territory does not matter, as the game constantly is in fluid motion with players passing the ball up and down the field. Soccer players must improvise plays without strategy sessions and without direct assistance from the coaching staff, making it a useful model for guerrilla warfare (and terrorist attacks for that matter).

Violations of rules (such as the use of violence) are assessed against the individual player (yellow or red card) and not against the team. However, within the immediate area of the goal, violations may be charged by permitting the opposing team to have a free kick (attack) at the goal. In contrast to American football, most soccer attacks on the goal usually are disguised, indirect and sudden. Direct attacks usually are easily thwarted by the defense. Soccer players also use tactics such as disruption, frustration and attention diffusion. Each player understands the ultimate goal, yet it really is a decentralized execution.

In contrast to American football, where long, blitzkrieg-style passes from a single quarterback to a single receiver are common, soccer employs tactics of multiple, quick and short passes among three, four or even five players in coordination to distract and confuse the opposing team. Like a pinball in a machine, the ball is passed from one

attacking player to another quickly without any centralized plan. This style of soccer attack is ideally suited to guerrilla and terrorist warfare because it requires improvisation among the players rather than detailed advance planning. It also enjoys the advantages of surprise, since the defender cannot predict which player will receive the ball. The defending team can be surprised by such an attack and defeated even if it has numerical superiority.

#### SUPERPOWER VERSUS TERRORISTS

What are the implications of the U.S. obsession with football on its war-fighting strategy? As noted earlier, football jargon and tactics have influenced U.S. military operations since the nation's emergence as a global power. The development of U.S. air power, its technological advances in weaponry, communications and information systems parallel similar developments in football. Both reflect the contemporary U.S. strategy of war fighting, known as the "Weinberger Doctrine" after Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger during the Reagan administration and refined by Gen. Colin Powell to become the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine.

"The study of the classical works on strategy provided an excellent point of departure and a broader perspective from which to examine the lessons of In contrast to American football, soccer employs tactics of multiple, quick and short passes among three to five players to confuse the opposing team.



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the Vietnam War," observed Michael Handel, a former professor at the Naval War College, in "Masters of War: Sun Tsu, Clausewitz and Jomini." "Eventually, these collectively learned lessons ... were 'codified' in the Weinberger Doctrine, which subsequently proved its value as a guide in the highest-level political and strategic decision-making processes preceding the war against Iraq."

The Weinberger-Powell Doctrine can be understood as conditions that should be met before the Unites States would commit military forces to a conflict. They include ideas such as U.S. forces should be used only if vital interests are at stake, sufficient force should be applied with the intention of winning

Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) land outside Karbala before engaging in a block-to-block fight against Iraqi defenders. Air-assault elements are ideally equipped for "soccer-like" military operations.



Villagers from the town of As Samawah, Iraq, leave their homes under cover of a white flag as U.S. armor approaches.

the conflict, and political and military objectives should be clearly defined.

The Weinberger-Powell Doctrine was most effectively applied tactically in the 1991 Persian Gulf War using massive air attacks followed by overwhelming ground forces equipped with modern technology to rapidly defeat enemy forces and minimize coalition

casualties. In addition, the doctrine specifies "exit conditions," which reflect the American desire to fight and win conflicts quickly.

The dependence of the United States on overwhelming technological superiority to fight its wars has proven effective when matched against conventional forces, such as Iraq in 1991, Serbia in 1989, the Taliban in 2002 and, most recently, Operation Iraqi Freedom. These opponents confronted the United States with a defined center of mass and were, therefore, vulnerable to U.S. military superiority. However, U.S. warfighting strategies have failed in situations where the enemy is ill-defined,

hidden, spread out over the world or, simply stated, employs strategies of soccer.

Examples include the Vietnam War, the U.S. "war on drugs" in Latin America, and the debacles of U.S. interventions in Lebanon (1982-1983) and Somalia (1992-1993). In these conflicts, U.S. superiority in technology and power was neutralized by primitive, yet effective, means. During the Vietnam conflict, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong successfully employed soccer tactics by dispersal of forces, guerrilla warfare and defensive tactics. The Vietnamese, however, were defeated when they attempted to confront the U.S. using football tactics in large-scale, massed attacks (such as in the Tet Offensive of 1967). Ultimately, the Vietnamese soccer strategy outlasted the U.S. football strategy, and the United States pulled out of the war.

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The other U.S. military failures also reflect the difficulties of the U.S. football way of war. The Lebanon intervention failed because of the use of suicide bombers and irregular warfare by Muslim militia groups. The Somali intervention was perhaps the most embarrassing failure, since U.S. troops, supported by overwhelming firepower, were defeated in

the battle of Mogadishu by gunmen of a warlord employing primitive methods of communication and weapons. Again, the Somalis used soccer tactics in countering U.S. conventional military superiority through hit-and-run attacks against weak points of the U.S. forces. They avoided straight-ahead attacks against U.S. centers of strength.

The present global war on terrorism against al-Qaida and other nonstate groups also demonstrates the limitations of the American style of warfare against an enemy following tactics of surprise and sneak attack against unguarded portions of the "playing field." Terrorists also employ the soccer

strategy of remaining on the defensive and applying constant pressure until a weakness appears in the opponent's defenses.

Contemporary U.S. adversaries who use soccer strategies tend to look at the entire world as their playing field, taking actions at openings where the United States and its allies are vulnerable to sneak attacks. Recent examples include the terrorist acts of Sept. 11, 2001, as well as al-Qaida actions that include the car-bomb attack on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998) and the attack against the USS Cole in Yemen (2000). It is illustrative of the limitations of U.S. power and the football-type strategy that conventional U.S. military responses to these terrorist attacks (cruise-missile attacks against suspected al-Qaida training camps) were ineffective. The terrorists were widely dispersed, used primitive

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technology and simply could blend into the civilian population.  $\,$ 

Another implication of the limitations that football strategy faces against opponents who use soccer tactics is that "penalties" assessed against individuals (as in soccer) do not materially hurt the terrorist "team." Eliminating Osama bin Laden was a necessary goal of U.S. strategy, but his death would not end the terrorist threat. Loosely organized, worldwide Islamic terrorist networks are believed to be fairly autonomous units capable of individual acts. Leadership is dispersed and decentralized. Once the determined terrorists complete their training, they go about the world (their battlefields) on their own (no more coaching or committee meeting) to carry out their terrorist missions. In addition, terrorists have the advantages of surprise and can choose the time and place for their attacks: Defense against such a soccer strategy is difficult.

In contrast, an American football team has a huge bureaucracy and extensive division of labor. It takes much more time and effort to move this team into combat readiness. (It took six months to prepare the U.S.-led coalition forces to fight the 1991 Persian Gulf War; the United States prepared for Operation Iraqi Freedom for almost a year).

#### WHAT SHOULD THE U.S. DO?

The United States can and should learn from the soccer paradigm of warfare to anticipate and counter non-American enemy moves. To defend our "goal"

(U.S. interests), we must retain the ability to apply carefully targeted, flexible force anywhere on the playing field. Instead of focusing on enemy "centers of gravity," the U.S. government should develop intelligence-collection capabilities to the point that it can anticipate terrorist activities anywhere around the globe.

We need to strengthen our midfield (overseas) defenses by increasing human-intelligence assets to the point that we are able to get inside the minds of our opponents, or at least inside their decision-to-execution cycles. Such intelligence needs to be passed between intelligence-collection and law enforcement agencies quickly, like soccer players passing the ball in a coordinated, combined attack on goal. Instead of stopping each play to plan tactics for the next move, we need to develop continuous modes of action to apply continuous pressure.

The United States needs to reorient its thinking about war, not as a series of discrete battles ("plays") marching down a field to victory, but rather a continuous struggle, part of the human condition that will require continual effort over many years. As in a soccer match, the United States must learn that victory is not gained in a single crushing attack; rather, it will require a shifting combination of both offense and defense. We must be prepared to play both over a long period.

Another recommendation is to create new roles and missions for special-operations forces (SOF), which have gained increased significance in the war against terrorism. The formation and training of SOF should take soccer concepts into account. The recent success of SOF in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrated the importance of this approach in modern warfare.

For years, U.S. military planners have been discussing the concept of "decentralized control, decentralized execution" as a transformational war-fighting strategy. To date, however, U.S. doctrine continues to emphasize force-on-force strategies. One of the reasons for the inability of the U.S. military to make the adjustments that are necessary to bring this concept into operational reality is due to the American football mind-set that pervades current defense planning.

A few years ago, two Chinese military officers wrote a book called "Unrestricted Warfare," which argued that the United States, as the world's superpower, is bound by its own doctrine to conventional reliance on overwhelming military force. Turning to soccer strategies means the superpower would be making major changes to its deeply held war-fighting doctrine. Will the United States modify its fundamental military paradigms to win the global war on terrorism? The two Chinese colonels asserted that it could not. The U.S. military could prove the Chinese wrong by incorporating soccer strategy into its doctrine — a truly transformational change.

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